Jean-Luc Brunel seen in Australia's Next Top Model, in 2008.

Jean-Luc Brunel: three former models say they were sexually assaulted by Jeffrey Epstein friend

Special investigation: As attention turns to associates of the deceased billionaire sex offender, the French model scout is back in the headlines

Jon Swaine *in Miami,* **Jon Henley** *in Amsterdam and* **Lucy Osborne** *in London*

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On a hot Friday evening in France last month, Jean-Luc Brunel was revelling in his natural habitat: a lavish party packed with the rich and beautiful.

Dressed all in white, the 72-year-old model scout mingled beside the pool at the Paris Country Club's $1,300-a-table Soirée Blanche, as a rock-and-roll band played, pink champagne flowed and a chef grilled rib-eye steaks over a flame.

Then came the hangover. The following day, FBI agents swooped on Brunel's old friend Jeffrey Epstein at an airport in New Jersey, arresting the disgraced money manager on new federal charges of child sex trafficking.

It was an alarming development for Epstein associates, such as Brunel, who are accused of aiding his abuse - and a flicker of hope for women who have been waiting years for the Frenchman to be held accountable.

Virginia Roberts Giuffre, a longtime Epstein accuser, alleged in court filings that teenage girls brought to the US by Brunel on model visas were "farmed out" by him to Epstein and others for sex. She also alleged she was made to have sex with Brunel several times in Epstein's homes. Brunel denies both allegations.

For more than 10 years, Epstein's enablers were presumed to be shielded from legal peril by his notorious 2007 plea deal's promise that he and "any potential co-conspirators" would avoid further charges after Epstein admitted that he solicited prostitution from a minor.

Several associates have, however, come under renewed scrutiny from US investigators, according to sources familiar with the inquiry, even as the renewed effort to bring Epstein to justice was derailed last week when the 66-year-old died of apparent suicide in a New York jail cell.

Allegations of misconduct against Brunel date back decades, yet he has faced no action. Three former models told the Guardian they were sexually assaulted by Brunel in the 1980s and 1990s in and around Paris, where he established himself as one of the global fashion industry's power players.

Brunel and his attorney did not respond to requests for comment. In a statement to the Guardian in 2015, Brunel vehemently denied involvement, "directly or indirectly", in Epstein's crimes. "I strongly deny having committed any illicit act or any wrongdoing in the course of my work as a scouter or model agencies manager," he said.

While several Epstein allies disappeared from public view in the years following his now-notorious plea deal, Brunel continued traversing the globe in search of young women and girls to make into models.

MC2, the Miami-based model agency Brunel founded with financial help from Epstein, did not respond to questions and multiple requests for comment. The company, which denied any connection to Epstein's crimes, has previously said Brunel was no longer actively working there.

But Brunel said in a 2015 legal case, which remains open, that he still owned MC2. In April, Brunel visited an agency in Brazil that MC2 has worked with in the past to find new models to bring over to the US, according to a source who saw him in Brasilia.

When a Guardian reporter visited an apartment in Miami Beach owned by Brunel last month, the door was answered by a young woman who said she was a Brazilian model there to work for MC2. The woman, who gave her first name and said she was 26, said she was one of four models staying in the apartment, which is listed as having one bedroom.

'I recall him lying on top of me'

Brunel rose to prominence during the 1980s as a scout at the Karin Models agency in Paris. He has said he launched the careers of some of the most successful models of the era, such as Jerry Hall, Angie Everhart and Christy Turlington.

Thysia Huisman was an 18-year-old model in 1991 who stayed at Jean-Luc Brunel's apartment.

Thysia Huisman was an 18-year-old model in 1991 who stayed at Jean-Luc Brunel's apartment. Photograph: Thysia Huisman

He was also a fixture of the French capital's ritzy social scene. The Les Bains nightclub was "where young women who've starved themselves parade for Jean-Luc Brunel", Desiree Gruber, a PR executive who was then a budding model, reportedly said in 1988. (A spokeswoman for Gruber said she did not remember Brunel).

Nights of dancing were followed by lively parties at Brunel's well-appointed home near the Karin headquarters on Avenue Hoche, according to people who attended. The apartment also housed a succession of younger models, many in their teens, who arrived from the US and elsewhere in Europe in search of success. They found they were expected to share bedrooms and to keep Brunel and his male friends company.

Thysia Huisman, then an 18-year-old Dutch model staying at the apartment, alleged

that one such evening in September 1991, she began feeling woozy after being given a drink by Brunel, and was taken to his bedroom.

I remember trying to move, but not really being able to. Like almost being paralysed. I heard ... my blouse ... ripping
Thysia Huisman

"I recall him lying on top of me, me trying to push him off," she said in an interview. "I remember trying to move, but not really being able to. Like almost being paralysed. I heard the sound of my blouse - a black blouse - ripping. I had a black skirt, too. I felt him - this is difficult - between my legs. Pushing."

Huisman said the rest was a blur. She woke the next morning in a kimono that wasn't hers, with soreness on her inner thighs. "I felt we had had sex," she said. "I knew. I know."

She gathered her things and fled while Brunel spoke on the telephone in the living room, she said. Her modelling work never recovered and she embarked on a career in television, always behind the camera.

At the time, Huisman said, she told her boyfriend she encountered a "terrible guy" in Paris, but did not reveal more. Her mother had died years earlier and she did not want to tell her father, who was already skeptical about her modelling.

"I was really ashamed," she said. Huisman said she began telling her current partner about the incident eight years ago. He confirmed to the Guardian she then told him she was "molested" by someone at her modelling agency, and added more details - including Brunel's name - over time, explaining the full story about two years ago.

An American former model, now 55, spoke on condition of anonymity because her work continues to overlap with the modelling industry. She said Brunel assaulted her outside Paris, having scouted her in the US in 1984.

The woman recalled finding herself alone with Brunel during a night out, after he led her to believe they were going to meet other people.

She estimated Brunel drove them from Paris in a "real fancy car" for approximately 45 to 60 minutes before they arrived at a grand estate with big iron gates. She believes, but is not sure, they were in Fontainebleau, approximately 35 miles south-east of the capital.

"He got undressed, put on a toweling robe and took a shower," she recalled. "I

thought, 'What am I going to do? There's no one here. I don't even know where we are.'

"He kept being all over me, and I was trying to fight him off. He was grabbing my breasts and my crotch. I kept trying to talk to him and say, 'Why are you doing this? I don't want to do this.'"

The former model said she escaped by climbing out of a window on to a ledge, and remained there for the rest of the night while Brunel slept inside. She remembered she was wearing a flannel shirt in green and black checks.

She gave up modelling not long after that, she said, and returned to her home state in the western US, where she remains today. "I thought to myself, 'Well this is it then, it's a horrible business'," she said. "I didn't feel safe."

The former model said she gave a full account of the incident to her roommate, whom she and the Guardian have made efforts to contact without reply. She also said she told an aunt who visited her in Paris soon afterward but died in recent years. She chose not to tell her parents as they would have been "devastated" at having put her in the situation, she said.

Courtney Soerensen as a young model in the early 1990s.

Courtney Soerensen as a young model in the early 1990s. Photograph: Courtney Soerensen

Courtney Soerensen was 19 when she went to Paris in April 1988 from her home town of Stoneboro, Pennsylvania. In an interview, she said Brunel subjected her to several incidents of unwanted touching, pestered her for sex and "sabotaged" her career when she rejected him.

"He would get very handsy, start groping me, try to kiss me, try to get me to lay down on the bed just to 'try it out'," said Soerensen, who now lives in California. "He would try to untuck my shirt, wanting to 'see my abs'. He would grab my breasts and put his hand on my bottom. There was one time where he rubbed himself up against me."

Soerensen said modelling work dried up when she pushed Brunel away a final time. Following a tearful call to her US agency, she said, she was spirited out of Brunel's home one night by people from another French firm and hidden for three days.

"If someone touched one of my daughters like that now, I would call it molestation," she said.

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Soerensen first publicly accused Brunel more than 30 years ago, in an interview broadcast for a story titled American Girls In Paris on CBS's news magazine show 60 Minutes. Then, too, she alleged she had lost work after rejecting Brunel's advances.

CBS has for years declined to release a recording or transcript of the December 1988 story, which was the subject of legal threats. This week Kevin Tedesco, a spokesman for the program, said: "That story is still on legal hold."

Despite a brief flurry of controversy over the CBS story, Brunel's career continued to thrive. But he faced resentment from peers upset by his alleged mistreatment of models, according to Michael Gross's 1995 book Model: The Ugly Business of Beautiful Women.

Jerome Bonnouvrier, a French modelling impresario who died in 2009, told Gross: "Jean-Luc is considered a danger." Even John Casablancas, the late modelling guru who was himself accused of sexually abusing models, told Gross: "I really despise Jean-Luc as a human being for the way he's cheapened the business."

'The guy was a vile pig'

Brunel took over Karin Models and in 1995 expanded into the US. Joey Hunter, a veteran American agent, agreed to go into business with him in New York. "It was the biggest mistake of my life," said Hunter, who sold his stake and quit after two years, sick of Brunel.

While shuttling between Manhattan and Miami, Brunel got to know Epstein, then flush with cash after taking over the financial affairs of Leslie Wexner, chairman of Victoria's Secret lingerie, in an arrangement that has puzzled analysts.

Brunel lived for a while in an apartment in Trump Tower, but moved out in 1999. The New York Post reported he was forced to leave "because of late-night carousing with beautiful women". Brunel denied this, saying the rent was too high.

From 2000 to 2005, Brunel took at least two dozen flights on Epstein's private jet, according to flight records released to court, travelling to the Bahamas, the British Virgin Islands and elsewhere. Early on, Brunel's full name was entered in the manifest alongside the initials of regulars such as "GM" for Epstein's close friend Ghislaine Maxwell. But by the end of the period, he was familiar enough to go by

"JLB".

The girls who slept with him worked. The girls who didn't, he would tell bookers: 'I don't want her booked for anything'
Clayton Nelson

Clayton Nelson, a photographer and scout who worked for Brunel at Karin around that time, said he was horrified by Brunel's treatment of women. "The guy was a vile pig," said Nelson. "The girls who slept with him worked. The girls who didn't, he would tell bookers: 'I don't want her booked for anything'."

In 2005, Brunel transformed Karin's US division into MC2, opening offices in New York and Miami. Speculation spread that Epstein had helped found the new firm. Epstein and MC2 denied they had any business relationship.

Yet in a sworn statement in 2010, MC2's former bookkeeper said Epstein had guaranteed a $1m line of credit for MC2, and directly paid for the visas of models brought to the US to work for the company.

The bookkeeper, Maritza Vasquez, said Brunel and models as young as 13 lived in apartments controlled by Epstein on Manhattan's East 66th Street. Despite Epstein not charging rent, Brunel billed the models $1,000 a month, Vasquez said.

Roberts Giuffre, the Epstein accuser, alleged in a 2014 court filing that the system was a cover for sex trafficking. Brunel "would offer the girls 'modelling' jobs", it said. "Many of the girls came from poor countries or impoverished backgrounds, and he lured them in with a promise of making good money."

One girl said to have come to New York through this scheme was 14-year-old Nadia Marcinkova. Police files from the original Epstein inquiry said he boasted to another victim that Marcinkova was his "sex slave", purchased from her parents in the former Yugoslavia. "She never actually even worked as a model," Vasquez said. Marcinkova did not respond to requests for comment.

A 2017 photo provided by the New York state Sex Offender Registry shows Jeffrey Epstein.

A 2017 photo provided by the New York state Sex Offender Registry shows Jeffrey Epstein. Photograph: AP

Memos of phone calls kept by Epstein's domestic staff in Florida show Brunel would call with cryptic-sounding messages "He has a teacher for you to teach you Russian," said the note of one Brunel call for Epstein in April 2005. "She is 2 x 8 years old not

Blonde. Lessons are free and you can have 1st today if you call."

Then the authorities caught up. Acting on a tip-off, police in Palm Beach arrested Epstein. Brunel later said in a court filing that he "went to Europe and Asia for a period of time" because Epstein ordered him to leave Florida to avoid having to give testimony.

In a deal that would later provoke outrage, Epstein spent just 13 months in a Florida jail after pleading to procuring an underage girl for prostitution.

His friendship with Brunel initially survived. Brunel visited Epstein in jail in 2008, according to court records and, according to Vasquez, continued living in the Epstein-owned apartment in Manhattan for years afterward.

But by 2015, amid one of the legal flashpoints in the case since the plea deal, Brunel said he'd had enough. He sued Epstein, alleging he and MC2 "lost multiple contacts and business in the modelling business as a result of Epstein's illegal actions".

Claiming to have been "emotionally destroyed" by inaccurate reports connecting him to Epstein's activities, Brunel even submitted a photograph of the label from his bottle of Prozac as an exhibit in the case.

Among the other evidence Brunel offered was correspondence from an executive at Mega Partners, a modelling agency in Brazil, stating that the firm had been unable to work with Brunel for five years because of his association with Epstein.

Yet it was with Mega Partners that Brunel was working in April this year, watching as hopeful young women sashayed down a makeshift catwalk at the firm's offices in Brasilia. Nivaldo Oliveira Leite, Mega's chief executive, spoke fondly of him in a message posted to Facebook.

Brunel "will always have open doors to our house", he said.